ETHICS FOR MODERN CHRISTIANS
PART II - THE NEW MORALITY
MATTHEW 5:17-22
ISAIAH 1:12-17

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Of all the things Jesus said, none is any more perplexing than this: "I have not come to abolish the law - he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven". And then, immediately, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven".

Try to imagine the setting. Jesus was teaching his disciples: in the classical posture of rabbi and student, he was sitting and they were standing around him. Around the periphery of their little circle, however, probably stood some other men; men who had become rather intensely interested in what he was saying, particulary in the area of law and righteousness and goodness. The scribes were there: these were the men responsible for copying the law, teaching it, and interpreting its 613 separate statutes to the faithful. The Pharisees were there: these were the men who had made a profession out of obeying the law. Whatever it prescribed they did. Now, sometimes we're inclined to be a little rough with the Pharisees. Their name has become synonymous with pompous, arrogant self-righteousness. But I think we need to remember that in fact, the Pharisees were altogether admirable men. They were generous in their charity: they bore responsibility for the common life of the people: they were respectable pillars of society. They did not knowingly do anything forbidden by the law. Their interest in Jesus, therefore, was more than academic: they had a personal stake in anything anybody said about the law.

And so when he said that he had come not to abolish the law they would have heaved a sigh of relief: because they had heard, frankly, that he was a rabble rouser: that he was urging people to ignore the sacred law of Judaism. And when he went on to say that the man who keeps the commandments and teaches them would be great in the kingdom of heaven, the began to feel pretty good. This fellow wasn't so bad after all.

But then, without warning - or even a transitional sentence to soften the impact - he said, "Unless your righteous exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you aren't even going to get in the kingdom of heaven".

Now, obviously, that was very offensive to them. But beyond that it was perplexing: it was logically inconsistant. How could he say all those supportive things about the

law, and then turn right around and infer that real righteousness has very little to do with the law? Well, he did say it: and what he was doing was shifting the definition of righteousness, morality or goodness away from the law and depositing it somewhere else. He was not, please notice, suggesting that the law had no validity: he was not suggesting that it ought to be discarded. Quite to the contrary, he was saying that the law is a good thing - a necessary thing - but it is simply no longer the way to define goodness.

That issue did not originate with Jesus. In the history of Israel, time and time again the people obey the law but fail to obey God. The prophets were the men who saw it happening and had the courage to bring it to the attention of the people: Amos, Micah, Jeremiah, Isaiah: "Cease to do evil" - Isaiah 1:17 that's the law: "learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression: defend the fatherless, plead for the widow": that's the will of God that extends beyond the letter of the law. That's the "more than" to which Jesus was referring.

And - it is still very much the issue as we think about ethics for modern Christians. For our situation is really quite like that of the Pharisees. In our culture goodness, or morality, is still being defined in the negative terms of the law. For us it is not the Law of Moses, of course. It is the whole body of rules and regulations by which this culture has attempted to define what is good and what is bad. Christian ethics, more often than not, simply sound like good citizenship: don't kill, steal, cheat or lie. Now, I am not suggesting that the law is irrelevant or unimportant: I am saying that obeying the law is not what constitutes a Christian ethic. It wasn't in Jesus day in regard to the Pharisees: and it isn't today.

The whole issue was elevated to a level of national controversy in the last decade in the form of "The New Morality" or "Situation Ethics". Men like Bishop Robison who wrote Honest to God, the late Bishop James Pike and Professor Joseph Fletcher whose book Situation Ethics became a best seller, stirred up the pot and got the controversy going and sold a lot of books. The basic thrust of their argument was simply to move the emphasis in Christian Ethics from the negative to the positive. But nobody seemed to hear that part: what sold books and made the proponents of the "New Morality" popular speakers on the lecture circuit were the illustrations they used and their statements that no law is

ultimate: that a Christian has to decide what to do for himself in every different situation. That sounded pretty shaky to a lot of folks, particularly those with a rather strong sense of man's sinful nature. It sounded, frankly, like a rationale for doing what you want to do; and the deep seated Calvinism in us concluded that if that's all there is to making moral decisions things aren't going to turn out well very much of the time.

I happen to think that the "New Morality" is not really very new. I think that any responsible moral decision is always situational. I think that laws are situational: that is to say, it is illegal to kill another man - sometimes, depending on the circumstances. But more to the point, let's look for a minute at what the "New Morality" was trying to say.

In his book, Fletcher summarizes the basic idea, "Only one thing is intrinsically good, namely, love: nothing else. The ultimate norm of Christian decisions is love: nothing else." What that means is that there are situations in which a sensitive man may find himself torn between what traditionally he regards as right behavior, but what in a given set of circumstances may not be at all that simple. I cited the example of the frontier woman who had to decide between smothering her own baby, or allowing the baby's crying to expose her entire family to massacre. Another dramatic illustration had to do with a German woman, captured by the Russians, who allowed herself to be impregnated by a prison camp guard because that was the only way she could get back to Germany and her husband and children. The decision to drop the Atomic Bomb was situational: based on the assumption that evil as it was, it was better than the alternatives.

Fletcher, et.al., have been criticized because their illustrations are so "abnormal". Lawrence of Arabia is cited, for instance. Two of his Arab lieutenants got into a feud and one killed the other. Lawrence knew that a blood bath would be the result with the victim's family warring with the murderer's family for a generation. And so he simply shot the murderer and solved the problem.

Now, you and I aren't likely to be in that situation, nor in the situation of the German woman: nor do I have plans to be in on the decision to push the nuclear button. Ethical decisions come at us a little less dramatically, and so I think it's probably irrelevant to spend a lot of time talking about those incidents proposed by the authors

to prove their point.

What is important, however, is to understand and see the rightness of the basic argument: that the law - whatever it is for us - is not the sole arbiter of moral behavior: that any kind of meaningful ethic for Christians today is going to take us outside the safe perimeters of the law.

Therein lies the problem. The New Morality - and the ethical teaching of Jesus assumes that people can be and want to be free: free to come to their own conclusions. But people don't always want to be free. There is a very famous passage from Dostoyevsky's great novel The Brothers Karamazov in which Jesus has returned to earth and is arrested. In the dark of night the Grand Inquisitor visits him to explain that people want security, not freedom. If you really love people, he argues, you want to make them happy, not free. People want law, not responsibility...Christ, he says, must not start again all that old business about freedom and grace and commitment and responsibility. Let things be: let the church with its laws handle them. Will Jesus please go away (Barclay: Christian Ethics in a Permissive Society. P.80)

Given the new complexity of our culture and the kinds of issues that are presenting themselves to us there is a certain anxiety and insecurity. Legalism looks pretty good, It would be comforting to rely on the law to tell what is right and wrong.

But there are dangers in legalism: and here,I believe, the New Morality has served well in keeping us alert. Mark Twain once referred to a man as "good, in the very worst sense of the word." And Donald Mathers has suggested that "the fanatical love of virture has done more damage to men and society than all the vices put together because it tends to discredit virture itself. "An example of that might be the way our nation's method of combatting drug addition has turned the traffic in narcotics into the life blood of the underworld.

William Barclay cites Ogden Nash's play The Rainmaker. "The Rainmaker makes love to a spinster girl in a barn at midnight. He does not really love her, but he is determined to save her from becoming spinsterized: he wants to give her back her womanhood, and to rekindle her hopes of marriage and children. Her morally outraged brother threatens to shoot him. Her father, a wise old rancher, says to his son: 'Noah, you're

so full of what's right that you can't see what's good' "(P.73)

Sometimes,I would suggest, the good and the right are in conflict: and in those situations a Christian must decide for himself - and not be a slave to legalism.

The real danger of legalism, however, - the disturbing aspect of religion that offers a set of rules as a Christian Ethic - is that it allows us very comfortably to ignore the "more than" of Jesus. It allows us - and this was the Pharsaical stance - to feel righteous because we have avoided doing things that are bad. And that's just not an adequate - nor honest - ethic for people who are trying to follow Jesus Christ.

In fairness it ought to be said that the New Morality - the situational rather than the legal approach to ethical decision making - has probably been abused and exploited and used as a rationale for casting the traditional standards to the wind and doing whatever one wants to do. But only because people have not heard what the situationists are saying about love as the ultimate moral arbiter. I regard it as simply foolish to attribute the collapse of morality - if, in fact, it is collapsing, to the New Morality. If premarital sex is on the increase, I would suggest that it's not because the church has said it's OK, but because young people have cars, mature earlier and marry later,and come of age in a culture so neurotically obsessed with sex that talking about it, reading about it and watching it have become a national past time.

Ethics for Modern Christians? The New Morality? The New Morality is-'t new. And no matter how hard we squeeze it the New Testament will not cough up a code or set of rules for every situation. It just isn't there.

What is there is a model: an example - and the "more than" of Jesus. "Your righteousness", he told them, "must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees." It must be more than refraining from those activities the law defines as evil. It is a positive ethic - not negative and his own life and teaching serve as the model for what it might look like if we ever began to take it seriously.

"Love your neighbor as yourself - that's the whole law in a nutshell" he told them once. "A man was going down to Jericho and he fell among robbers" he told them once, and in that story the men who stayed within the perimeters of legal morality walked on by. The good man was a samaritan who stopped,took the coat off his back, bound up the bloody

wounds and carried the victim to safety. "Feed my sheep" he told them, "heal the sick, help the blind to see, and see free people who are captives."

The word for it is love: not romantic love - not filial love: but hard-nosed good will toward all men: love that rolls its sleeves up to help: love that is at once tough and gentle: love that is open to others - that shares the personhood of another.

That, I would suggest has implications right here - particularly here - in the fellowship of the Church. Here, of all places, when one of us hurts, we all must learn to hurt. Here, of all places, joy ought to be shared and pain passed around. When one of us suffers the loss of someone dear, I count it one of the most rudimentary of Christian responsibilities for the people of the Church to close ranks and help bear that burden of sorrow.

It has other implications as well - for instance, in the way we spend our money, in the causes we support and the candidates we help to elect.

The word for it is love: and the model is the one who loved and gave until it cost him his life.

An ethic for modern Christians begins with the law - the law as the distilled essence of our culture's wisdom. But it ceases to be Christian if it stops there. Rather, it considers next the situation: and then finally, and most important of all, it asks, "What does love demand of me".

That is the "More than" of Jesus. That is anything but moral laxity. It is, rather, the most difficult and demanding ethic you and I have ever tried. I invite you to it.AMEN

Father, help us to sort out the good when we make our decisions. Then give us the courage to do it. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN